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ABSTRACT

The kinds of testing of listening skills that could be introduced for Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools (FLES) in the early stages of instruction (e.g., in the third grade at the end of 10-20 clock hours of instruction) are discussed. It is suggested that listening is rarely tested in isolation, but normally is mixed with speaking or writing. At least three types of test item responses exist for listening: action response, evaluation response, and communication response. All are intended to create a response that can be used to evaluate listening (comprehension) skill without resorting to the other language skills or with only minimal use of simple utterances that make little or no demand on the speaking skill. In an action response one hears a command and physically carries out the command. The complexity of the teacher's utterance and the degree of familiarity of the utterance could become factors in the determination of scores. An evaluation response calls for the learners to give some indication of whether an utterance accurately portrays reality, or which of a set of possible responses is the correct one. Action response and evaluation response items call for little or no use of speaking, while communication response calls for oral response. The students' utterance involves not only their perception of the teacher's message, but also its intent and the formulation of an appropriate response with well-chosen linguistic structures. (SW)

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TESTING IN BEGINNING FLES: LISTENING

by Loren Alexander

As we become more involved in a growing program for Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools (FLES), it becomes ever more important to establish reasonable goals and to see that there is some type of measurement of the degree to which those goals are attained. This paper discusses the kinds of testing of the primary skill - listening - that could be introduced in a FLES program in the early stages of instruction, for example, in the third grade at the end of 10-20 clock hours of instruction.

Comprehension of messages in the foreign language, or: listening, is generally accepted as the basic skill among the main four: Listening (Comprehension), Speaking, Reading and Writing. (James 1985) Most modern methods for older learners allow an extended period of acquisition of listening skills before expecting or requiring one of the other three skills. (See: Asher 1977; Dodson 1974; Lozanov 1978) In fact, the currently popular Total Physical Response techniques that were developed by Asher are an expansion of and a careful organization of activities that can maintain a focus on listening over a long period of time and that can introduce almost all aspects of grammar and vocabulary. Both secondary school and FLES teachers have found this age-old technique to be a very valuable tool, especially in the form promoted by Asher. And, of course, we are speaking here of listening as an element of communication. If we wish to assist learners in becoming communicators in the foreign language, we must create courses that encourage the teacher to use the foreign language "as a means of

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communication in the classroom." (Rivers 1985)

If we wish to concentrate on listening skills as an element of communication over a lengthy portion of the school year, it becomes necessary to develop a testing program that correlates closely with the instruction we have given, and that is functional in the limited time-slot alloted to FLES. Ideas by authors of journal articles that focus mainly on secondary school or adult learners can be an inspiration for us, but often do not prove useful in FLES. For example, Jerry Larson's (1984) ideas for testing speaking ability in the classroom rely on the use of a language laboratory. Few, if any FLES programs have access to such equipment, nor would they perhaps find it efficient to use it with such young learners. We can most likely take Larson's ideas and adapt them to FLES, but adapt them we must!

We also need to test with procedures that call for minimal interference from other skills in the attempt to perceive the learners' level of comprehension. As Gunter Nold shows in his analysis of an example of discourse in elementary school foreign language learners' transactions with their teacher, " the two functions of classroom discourse, informing and eliciting, are both focused in this transaction. They in turn aim at different pedagogical objectives: the transmission of information and the use of correct forms of the second language. And yet, both functions are combined in one transaction....[P]ronouns in particular, were not used although the pupils were familiar with them; there is no textual cohesion." (Nold 1978, 56)

Thus we begin to understand the complexities of discourse, and the difficulty of separating one element, listening, for evaluation. Of course, we shall probably (hopefully !?) never be able to fully read the

internal, intellectual response of the listener; we must rely on some external indicator of the quality of comprehension of messages in the foreign language that takes place in the brain of the listener. The simpler the task of responding in a non-linguistic manner (physical actions) or a manner that requires only minimal linguistic skill ("yes" or "no"), the more we shall be able to judge the quality of comprehension of the message without relying on the complexities of the full spoken utterance.

Examples of our strong focus on speaking, to the neglect of listening, can be found easily in the curricula for FLES. The excellent set of materials and guidelines for K-3 FLES produced by Jones, et al. (1982), lists ten objectives for the first lesson, of which three use the mother tongue to elicit information, and seven that rely on a spoken response. None call for a listening-only response.

My own observations of myself and others lends support to the assumption that the skill of listening is rarely tested in isolation; rather, there is normally a mix of listening and speaking, or listening and writing. The listening portion of many nationally standardized exams treat this evaluation procedure properly; they have pictures, on which several comments are given orally in the recorded test item, and in response to which the learner merely marks A, B, C, or D on an answer sheet. But how many of us have developed similar tests for our day-to-day teaching? The demands on the teacher's time for the development of such test items, to say nothing of the sophisticated procedures involved in writing the item response-options, precludes much of this taking place in the average curriculum.

We now are beginning to reap the rewards of the current efforts to develop a set of refined guidelines for oral proficiency testing.

Heilenmann and Kaplan's (1985) chart of various aspects of a curriculum for Novice level French is an example of the kind of detailed information on the curriculum at a specific level that will assist the testing process and the teaching process.

Heilenmann and Kaplan (1985) list three content areas: 1) Functions (Making lists, Memorized materials, etc.); 2) Topics (Daily life: objects, places, colors, dates, numbers, etc.; Routine activities); 3) Accuracy (Basic word order, etc.); and describe the functional control required for specific levels of language under the four basic skills and Culture (Greeting, etc.). The skill of Comprehension (Listening), parallels the other categories in being broken down into three levels of control: 1) Full Control; 2) Partial Control; and 3) Conceptual Control. The explanations for the level of Full Control for Comprehension are "Understanding memorized material; Operating in situations aided by context." (Heidenmann 1985, 64-65) It is this type of detailed explanation of proficiency that will help the teacher construct appropriate test items for their beginning FLES learners.

Each teacher can develop his/her own chart of language skills and discourse functions that coincides with the teacher's own goals and setting. If this is perceived as a process, rather than as a fixed set of demands, one can use such a chart to great advantage as a springboard for testing and for subsequent curriculum planning, leading to new charts, and new testing procedures and test items, and so on ad infinitum. Alexander and John (in print) analyze an example of a teacher's self-developed testing procedure, and find that it is innovative in the manner of testing four learners at once with the assistance of a native speaker from the local community. Innovative

ideas can stimulate all of us to carry out our own testing program in a manner that is consonant with our setting.

With such groundwork in mind, and recognizing that testing procedures influence content and vice versa, and that these will influence the clarification of goals, let us turn to the kinds of testing that would measure achievement in listening, to the exclusion or near-exclusion of the other three language skills.

There are at least three types of test item response for the listening skill: 1) Action Response; 2) Evaluation Response; and Communication Response.

Action Response

In an Action Response one hears a command and physically carries out the command: "Stand up!" "Put the big green book under the little red book!" "Draw ears on the dog and color them brown!" etc. There is no demand for linguistic utterance in the response. The teacher can check more than one child at a time, in the interest of the efficiency demanded by most FLES programs. Three or four students can carry out the body-movement commands; the teacher can observe who responds without hesitation, who responds with hesitation, but correctly, and who responds incorrectly, and the items can be weighted accordingly; for example, 2 points for immediate and correct response; 1 point for response with hesitation; and 0 points for incorrect response, even if the correct response quickly follows. In most instances, the learners will be able to give a response of some kind, if only in imitation of the other learners, who give a quick response. All can feel some sense of satisfaction, and this is to be encouraged. Evaluation can perhaps best serve the purpose of informing the teacher how well he/she is teaching, rather than precisely determining the full range of

achievement that the individual learners have attained.

Flashcards with items on any topic can be placed around the room; the teacher refers in some manner to one of the cards, and students point to the appropriate card. A local FLES teacher used this approach during full class responses in daily instruction to very good effect. It is very easy to see who points readily to the correct card; who hesitates; and who is confused.

This use of flashcards should first be a part of the regular lessons, thus it is nothing new in content or procedure for the learners when testing time arrives. Such prior work with the testing procedure in daily instruction helps create a comfortable, low anxiety setting for testing.

Action Responses also include procedures other than those mentioned here. One can ask the learner to check the appropriate picture in a series of three or four on a sheet of paper. The physical action involved is minimal, and the response does not involve a linguistic utterance. Thus such action responses do, to some degree, measure the skill of listening, and to no degree the skill of speaking. The required interpretation of a set of pictures does, however, bring in an aspect of testing that has little if anything to do with the accurate comprehension of the teacher's utterance in the test item. To the degree that an interpretation of the picture is involved, the item is checking something other than listening.

The complexity of the teacher's utterance and the degree of familiarity of the utterance could become factors in the determination of scores. For example, the item: "Put the big green book under the little red book!" is more demanding in a situation with five colors of books and three sizes of each, than the situation in which one has only

one big green book, one little red book, and one little green book. And if the colors involved are the tenth and eleventh colors introduced to the class, one can anticipate that these will sometimes be less well learned by testing time than the first two that were learned. One could then give more weight to either set, depending on the information one wishes to discover. Are the learners retaining language learned early in the course? or: Have the learners acquired comprehension of recently introduced utterances?

Of course, the focus here has been on only one element of this test item - the terms for colors. One can also, and should, judge the quality of response to the part of the utterance having to do with the verb, i.e. what to do with the properly selected books.

We have only touched on the possibilities for analysis of response and types of test item that can be discussed under Action Response. In order to discuss all three types of response in this brief paper, let us move on to the second type: Evaluation Response.

Evaluation Response

An Evaluation Response calls for the learners to give some indication of whether an utterance accurately portrays reality, or which of a set of possible responses is the correct one. For example, the learner can be asked to indicate whether a statement is true or false by various means: A nod or shake of the head; Circling a letter or symbol; using minimal language skill by saying "yes" or "no", etc. One can narrate a well-known story, one that was a part of the regular lessons, and make misstatements: "The three bears poured their soup on the floor." At this point, we wish to merely receive confirmation on the veracity of the statement or an indication of its accuracy. At another level of language acquisition, we could call for the learner to narrate

what actually happened in the story at this point, and we would then be checking speaking skill.

Other types of Evaluation Response items call for discrimination of same or different, good or bad, and other easily designated dichotomies. Multiple choice items are possible, but too easily become bogged down in judgments that are difficult to measure for accuracy. For instance, one could have the learners look at a picture of the three bears and present an item asking for them to indicate which bear is small, which bear is larger than the small bear, and which bear is largest. The possibilities for misinterpretation of the cure by the learners for non-linguistic reasons, i.e. the quality of the drawing, make the responses to this kind of item somewhat more difficult to interpret accurately.

We could perhaps spend much time deriving many dichotomous situations before we would need to develop multiple choice items. The answers to a long list of dichotomies can give us much information in a brief amount of time, thus increasing the validity of the test. Such items can also be checked by action and responses with linguistic utterances. Evaluation Responses are asking for more than an indication of comprehension; they are asking for an indication of judgment according to a commonly agreed upon standard: What is "high" and when does "low" become an accurate response? Evaluation Response items demand a higher level of cognitive skill, and should be treated as such when they are compared to or used in conjunction with Action Response items.

Action Response items and Evaluation Response items call for little or no use of speaking. The third type of item, Communication Response, does call for speaking. Let us consider how Communication

Responses are not or to what degree they are not testing speaking skill.

Communication Response

Communication Response items call for any suitable non-predetermined utterance on the part of the learner. Any of an infinite variety of utterances will be accurate, because any one will indicate that the learner has comprehended the teacher's utterance. The question: "What do you like to eat?" could be answered in various ways, with various linguistic constructions, all of which would indicate that the learner comprehended the utterance: "Candy." "I like to eat hamburgers." Inappropriate utterances might be: "Monday." "My feet hurt."

In this type of response we move into an area of much complexity, and perhaps more complexity than we wish to have. The utterance in response to the test item creates a set of discourse functions that become difficult to interpret properly. One finds many possibilities for response, each of which would be difficult to analyze and explain clearly. The learner's utterance involves not only his perception of the teacher's message, but also its intent and the formulation of an appropriate response with well-chosen linguistic structures.

On the other hand, the Communication Response can be accurate over a wide range of possible utterances. And if the judgment of the accuracy of the response involves only the determination of whether the learner comprehended the message, the questions of correct form, correct terminology, and correct pronuncation will play no role beyond the teacher's ability to comprehend the learner's intent.

The Communication Response is, of course, an important step toward full verbal communication, and two steps beyond the Action

Response. The importance of including this type of item is counterbalanced by the difficulty of maintaining focus on the listening skill. One could include a few such items with full awareness of the nature of the problem. Communication Response items could then be emphasized in the speaking test.

At this point, it is important to say that these ideas are a tentative foray into a vastly complex and, to some degree, virgin territory. John Clark gives us some support in this, when he writes: "In the absence or near absence of comprehensive conceptual guidelines for the test development process, it is suggested that the most appropriate procedure for instrument development would be to submit to empirical tryout a large number of potentially useful assessment formats..." (1980, 16)

We can each of us in our own way learn to develop evaluation procedures and test items that reflect the state of the art of today, and can learn to discuss such problems with terminology that is appropriate to the topic and a tool for enlightened teaching.

Summary

Much testing in all of foreign language instruction appears to neglect the listening skill, and to be a hybrid item with listening-writing or listening-speaking combinations when it is used, rather than giving full attention to a type of response that would most closely approximate a situation that is uncontaminated by other skills.

Total Physical Response serves as a focus of our attention on a type of situation that calls for no linguistic utterance in the learner's response. From this procedure as a standard, we can move on to other techniques that parallel the physical action in response to an oral command.

This leads us to a consideration of three types of response: 1) Action Response; 2) Evaluation Response; and 3) Communication Response, all three of which are intended to create a response that can be evaluated for the listening (comprehension) skill without resorting to the other language skills (speaking, reading, writing) or with only minimal use of simple utterances that make little or no demand on the speaking skill.

Scoring schemes are the prerogative of the teacher, who best knows what kind of information should be gleaned from the test, and what kind of situation is involved, i.e. the type of setting, the characteristics of the learners, the instructional objectives, and the teacher's aims.

All teachers are encouraged to experiment with various types of testing procedures, evaluation criteria and scoring schemes, and to report the results in the journals of our expanding field of foreign language teaching and learning. We begin best at the beginning, and this is FLES in the first few weeks of instruction with emphasis on the primary language skill: listening.

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